

Practicing Peace

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If somebody doesn't begin to provide some kind of harmony, we will not be able to develop sanity in this world at all.

Somebody has to plant the seed so that sanity can happen on this earth.

—CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

Practicing Peace

War and peace start in the hearts of individuals. Strangely enough, even though all beings would like to live in peace, our method for obtaining peace over the generations seems not to be very effective: we seek peace and happiness by going to war. This can occur at the level of our domestic situation, in our relationships with those close to us. Maybe we come home from work and we're tired and we just want some peace; but at home all hell is breaking

loose for one reason or another, and so we start yelling at people. What is our motivation? We want some happiness and ease and peace, but what we do is get even more worked up and we get everyone else worked up too. This is a familiar scenario in our homes, in our workplaces, in our communities, even when we're just driving our cars. We're just driving along and someone cuts in front of us and then what? Well, we don't like it, so we roll down the window and scream at them.

War begins when we harden our hearts, and we harden them easily—in minor ways and then in quite serious, major ways, such as hatred and prejudice—whenever we feel uncomfortable. It's so sad, really, because our motivation in hardening our hearts is to find some kind of ease, some kind of

freedom from the distress that we're feeling.

Someone once gave me a poem with a line in it that offers a good definition of peace: "softening what is rigid in our hearts." We can talk about ending war and we can march for ending war, we can do everything in our power, but war is never going to end as long as our hearts are hardened against each other.

What happens is a chain reaction, and I'd be surprised if you didn't know what I'm talking about. Something occurs—it can be as small as a mosquito buzzing—and you tighten. If it's more than a mosquito—or maybe a mosquito is enough for you—something starts to shut down in you, and the next thing you know, imperceptibly the chain reaction of misery begins: we begin to fan the grievance with our thoughts. These

thoughts become the fuel that ignites war. War could be that you smash that little teensy-weensy mosquito. But I'm also talking about war within the family, war at the office, war on the streets, and also war between nations, war in the world.

We often complain about other people's fundamentalism. But whenever we harden our hearts, what is going on with us? There's an uneasiness and then a tightening, a shutting down, and then the next thing we know, the chain reaction begins and we become very righteous about our right to kill the mosquito or yell at the person in the car or whatever it might be. We ourselves become fundamentalists, which is to say we become very self-righteous about our personal point of view.

Jarvis Masters, who is a prisoner on

death row, has written one of my favorite spiritual books, called *Finding Freedom*. In a chapter called “Angry Faces,” Jarvis has his TV on in his cell but he doesn’t have the sound on because he’s using the light of the TV to read. And every once in a while, he looks up at the screen, then yells to people down the cell block to ask what’s happening.

The first time, someone yells back, “It’s the Ku Klux Klan, Jarvis, and they’re all yelling and complaining about how it’s the blacks and the Jews who are responsible for all these problems.” About half an hour later, he yells again, “Hey, what’s happening now?” And a voice calls back, “That’s the Greenpeace folks. They’re demonstrating about the fact that the rivers are being polluted and the trees are being cut down and the animals are being

hurt and our Earth is being destroyed.” Some time later, he calls out again, “Now what’s going on?” And someone says, “Oh, Jarvis, that’s the U.S. Senate and that guy who’s up there now talking, he’s blaming the other guys, the other side, the other political party, for all the financial difficulty this country’s in.”

Jarvis starts laughing and he calls down, “I’ve learned something here tonight. Sometimes they’re wearing Klan outfits, sometimes they’re wearing Greenpeace outfits, sometimes they’re wearing suits and ties, but they all have the same angry faces.”

I remember reading once about a peace march. When one group was coming back from the march, some pro-war people started cutting them off and blocking them; everyone started

screaming and hitting each other. I thought, “Wait a minute, is there something wrong with this picture? Clobbering people with your peace sign?” The next time you get angry, check out your righteous indignation, check out your fundamentalism that supports your hatred of this person, because this one really is bad—this politician, that leader, those heads of big companies. Or maybe it’s rage at an individual who has harmed you personally or harmed your loved ones. A fundamentalist mind is a mind that has become rigid. First the heart closes, then the mind becomes hardened into a view, then you can justify your hatred of another human being because of what they represent and what they say and do.

If you look back at history or you look at any place in the world where

religious groups or ethnic groups or racial groups or political groups are killing each other, or families have been feuding for years and years, you can see—because you're not particularly invested in that particular argument—that there will never be peace until somebody softens what is rigid in their heart. So it's necessary to take a big perspective on your own righteousness and your own fundamentalism when it begins to kick in and you think your own aggression and prejudice are reasonable.

I try to practice what I preach; I'm not always that good at it but I really do try. The other night, I was getting hard-hearted, closed-minded, and fundamentalist about somebody else, and I remembered this expression that you can never hate somebody if you stand in

their shoes. I was angry at him because he was holding such a rigid view. In that instant I was able to put myself in his shoes and I realized, “I’m just as riled up and self-righteous and closed-minded about this as he is. We’re in exactly the same place!” And I saw that the more I held on to my view, the more polarized we would become, and the more we’d be just mirror images of one another—two people with closed minds and hard hearts who both think they’re right, screaming at each other. It changed for me when I saw it from his side, and I was able to see my own aggression and ridiculousness.

If you could have a bird’s-eye perspective on the Earth and could look down at all the conflicts that are happening, all you’d see are two sides of a story where both sides think they’re

right. So the solutions have to come from a change of heart, from softening what is rigid in our hearts and minds.

One of the most inspiring modern examples we have of this is the civil rights movement. I was recently re-reading the writings of Martin Luther King Jr., and I understood once again that the whole movement was based on love—love that doesn't exclude anybody. This is also the Buddhist idea of love. In this view, you want everybody to be healed.

Now, some political activists might say, "OK, but nothing will ever change just by holding that all-inclusive, loving view." But the truth is, when you take that view and you begin to live by it, at the level of your own heart in your own everyday life, something begins to shift very dramatically, and you begin to see

things in a different way. You begin to have the clarity to see injustice happening, but you can also see that injustice, by its very definition, is harming everybody involved. It's harming the people who are being oppressed or abused, and it's harming those who are oppressing and abusing.

And from a Buddhist point of view, those who are being oppressed have a chance—just as people did in the civil rights movement—to be purified by what is happening to them. They have the opportunity to let hatred be replaced by love and compassion and to try to bring about change by nonviolence and nonaggression. Instead of sinking into self-absorption they have a chance to let their suffering link them with the suffering of all beings—those harming, those helping, and

those feeling neutral. In other words, they have a chance to soften what is rigid in their hearts and still hold the view that injustice is being done and work toward unwinding that injustice or that cruelty.

But those who are oppressing may be so prejudiced and rigid in their minds that there's very little opportunity for them to grow and learn. So they're the ones who ultimately suffer the most, because their own hatred and anger and prejudice continue to grow. There is nothing that causes more pain and suffering than to be consumed by bigotry, to be consumed by cruelty and anger.

So war and peace start in the human heart. Whether that heart is open or whether that heart closes has global implications.

Recently, I was teaching from a Buddhist text called *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, which offers guidance to those who wish to dedicate their lives to alleviating suffering and to bringing benefit to all sentient beings. This was composed in the eighth century in India by a Buddhist master named Shantideva. In it he has an interesting point to make about peace. He says something along the lines of, “If these long-lived, ancient, aggressive patterns of mine that are the wellspring only of unceasing woe, that lead to my own suffering as well as the suffering of others, if these patterns still find their lodging safe within my heart, how can joy and peace in this world ever be found?”

Shantideva is saying that as long as we justify our own hard-heartedness

and our own self-righteousness, joy and peace will always elude us. We point our fingers at the wrongdoers, but we ourselves are mirror images; everyone is outraged at everyone else's wrongness.

And then Shantideva makes another thought-provoking point. He says that the people who we get so upset at, they eventually move away or they die. And likewise, with nations that fight each other, time passes and either the nations no longer exist or they shift alliances and enemies become allies. He reminds us how everything changes with time. But the negative seeds that are left in our mindstream, the impact of our hatred and our prejudice, is very long-lived. Why so? Because as long as we keep strengthening our anger and self-righteousness with our thoughts and our words and our actions, they

will never go away. Instead, we become expert at perfecting our habits of hard-heartedness, our own particular brand of rigid heart and closed mind.

So what I'm advocating here is something that requires courage—the courage to have a change of heart. The reason this requires courage is because when we don't do the habitual thing, hardening our heart and holding tightly to certain views, then we're left with the underlying uneasiness that we were trying to get away from. Whenever there's a sense of threat, we harden. And so if we don't harden, what happens? We're left with that uneasiness, that feeling of threat. That's when the real journey of courage begins. This is the real work of the peacemaker, to find the soft spot and the tenderness in that very uneasy place and stay with it.

If we can stay with the soft spot and stay with the tender heart, then we are cultivating the seeds of peace.

I think to do this kind of work it's very helpful to take some kind of personal vow. You make it clear in your own mind what you wish for and then you make a vow. For instance, let's say you hit your children and it's habitual, but then you make a vow to yourself: "Whatever happens, I'm not going to hit them." You seek help and you look everywhere for ways to help you not hit them when that uneasiness arises and everything in you wants to close your heart and mind and go on automatic pilot and do the thing that you always hate yourself for doing. You vow that to the best of your ability—knowing that sometimes there's going to be backsliding, but nevertheless, to the best of

your ability—you vow not to cause harm to yourself or to anybody else, and to actually help yourself and your children.

This kind of vow should be put in words that are meaningful and true to you so they aren't somebody else's good thoughts but actually your own highest, heartfelt wish for yourself. Your motivation behind the vow is that you equate it with the ultimate kindness for yourself, not the ultimate punishment or the ultimate shaping up, like "I'm bad, I need to shape up." No, the basic view is that there's nothing wrong with you or me or anybody else.

It's like what Zen Master Suzuki Roshi once said. He looked out at his students and said, "All of you are perfect just as you are and you could use a little improvement." That's how it is.

You don't start from the view of "I'm fundamentally messed up and I'm bad and therefore I have to get myself into shape." Rather, the basic situation is good, it's sound and healthy and noble, and there's work that we need to do because we have ancient habits that we've been strengthening for a long time, and it's going to take a while to unwind them.

Living by a vow is very helpful, and actually it's Jarvis Masters who caused me to think about this. His Tibetan teacher, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, went to San Quentin Prison and, through the glass, talking through a telephone, did an empowerment ceremony in which Jarvis took the vow to never cause harm and, to the best of his ability, to try to help. He has lived by these vows so earnestly, and when I

read his book sometimes I laugh out loud at the extremes to which he has to go to not cause harm in a place like San Quentin.

To prevent some hostile, disrespectful guards from being killed, for instance, he had to talk some angry inmates into flooding their cells because they needed a way to express their rage. He knew that if he didn't come up with something, they were planning to retaliate by stabbing the guards. So instead he said, "Listen, the whole thing is, you don't need to kill them. These guys are wanting to get out of here to go to a party so you just need to ruin their day by making them work late cleaning up the mess we'll make." And everyone bought it, so they just flooded the tier.

One of my favorite stories about

Jarvis was when he unintentionally helped some other inmates connect with the absolute, vast quality of their own minds. There is a teaching that says that behind all hardening and tightening and rigidity of the heart, there's always fear. But if you touch fear, behind fear there is a soft spot. And if you touch that soft spot, you find the vast blue sky. You find that which is ineffable, ungraspable, and unbiased, that which can support and awaken us at any time. And somehow Jarvis, in this story of trying to avert harm, conveyed this fundamental openness to the other inmates.

One day there was a seagull out on the yard in San Quentin. It had been raining, and the seagull was there paddling around in a puddle. One of the

inmates picked up something in the yard and was about to throw it at the bird. Jarvis didn't even think about it—he automatically put out his hand to stop the man. Of course this escalated the man's aggression and he started yelling. Who the hell did Jarvis think he was? And why did Jarvis care so much about some blankety-blank bird?

Everyone started circling around, just waiting for the fight. The other inmate was screaming at Jarvis, "Why'd you do that?" And out of Jarvis's mouth came the words, "I did that because that bird's got my wings."

Everyone got it. It simply stopped their minds, softened their hearts, and then there was silence. Then they all started laughing and joking with him. Even years later, they still tease him,

“What did you mean, Jarvis, ‘That bird’s got my wings’?” But at that moment, everyone understood.

If we begin to take responsibility for our own self-righteousness, it leads to empathy. Here’s one more Jarvis story to illustrate this. Many of the prison guards in San Quentin are very kind and helpful, but some of them get mean and unreasonable and take their frustrations out on the prisoners. That day there had been plenty of that happening and tempers were short. An inmate came up to Jarvis in the yard and asked, “Is it your Buddhism that keeps you so calm, Jarvis? How can you stand it when these guards are giving you such shit?”

And Jarvis said, “Oh, it has nothing to do with Buddhism. I just think that if I retaliate, they’ll go home and beat

their kids. I don't want that to happen to any of those little kids." The other man got it completely. Our empathy and wisdom begin to come forward when we're not clouded by our rigid views or our closed heart. It's common sense. "If I retaliate, then they'll go home and beat their kids, and I don't want that happening."

There are many stories, but the basic message I'm trying to convey is that if we want there to be peace in the world, then we have to take responsibility when our own hearts and minds harden and close. We have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid, to find the soft spot and stay with it. We have to have that kind of courage and take that kind of responsibility. That's true spiritual warriorship. That's the true practice of peace.

Positive Insecurity

In this book I've been exploring the topic of peace at the personal level, the level of each of us working with our own minds and our hearts. But I want to make it very clear that however we work with our minds and hearts, these days will impact the future of this planet.

The Buddhist teachings on karma, put very simply, tell us that each moment in time—whether in our personal lives or in our life together on Earth—

is the result of our previous actions. According to these teachings, what we experience in the present is the result of the seeds we've sown for hundreds of years, over the course of many lifetimes. It's also the case that the seeds you sowed yesterday have their result in your own life today. And the seeds that the United States has sown in the last year, five years, fifty years, hundred years, and so forth are having their impact on the world right now—and not just what the United States has sown but all the countries that are involved in the world situation today, being as painful as it is. We've been sowing these seeds for a long time.

I know many of us feel a kind of despair about whether all this can ever unwind itself. The message of this book is that it has to happen at the level of

individuals working with their own minds, because even if these tumultuous times are the result of seeds that have been sown and reaped by whole nations, these nations of course are made up of millions of people who, just like ourselves, want happiness.

So whatever we do today, tomorrow, and every day of our lives until we die sows the seeds for our own future in this lifetime and sows the seeds for the future of this planet. The Buddhist teachings also say that the seeds of our present-day actions will bear fruit hundreds of years from now. This may seem like an impossibly long time to wait, but if you think in terms of sowing seeds for your children's future and for your grandchildren's future and your grandchildren's grandchildren's future, perhaps that's more real and immediate to

you. Nevertheless, how we work with ourselves today is how a shift away from widespread aggression will come about.

The other day I was given an article that contained a quote by the German political thinker Rudolph Bahro. He writes, “When an old culture is dying, the new culture is created by those people who are not afraid to be insecure.”

I suppose some would question whether an old culture is dying right now, but somehow it rings true for me that we’re in a time of major change, a major transition in the world, and many of us are rather nervous about where we’re headed. But this quotation offers the intriguing suggestion that the new culture will be created by those who are not afraid to be insecure. The writer and teacher Alan Watts titled one of his

books *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. Bahro's quote is pointing us in that direction.

You can think of insecurity as a moment in time that we experience over and over in our lives. When you feel insecurity, whether you're feeling it in the middle of the night out of nowhere or whether it's constant, there is a groundless and unformed quality to it. As I've already said, the Buddhist teachings suggest that this kind of insecurity can serve as a direct path to freedom—if you can stop yourself from setting off the chain reaction of aggression and misery.

You can think of the groundlessness and openness of insecurity as a chance that we're given over and over to choose a fresh alternative. Things happen to us all the time that open up the space. This

spaciousness, this wide-open, unbiased, unprejudiced space, is inexpressible and fundamentally good and sound. It's like the sky. Whenever you're in a hot spot or feeling uncomfortable, whenever you're caught up and don't know what to do, you can find someplace where you can go and look at the sky and experience some freshness, free of hope and fear, free of bias and prejudice, just completely open. And this is accessible to us all the time. Space permeates everything, every moment of our lives.

You could say that this spaciousness and simplicity, dwelling in that place ongoingly, would be a description of the enlightened or awakened state. But even for people like you and me, it's accessible all the time. We experience it very directly whenever we feel wonder, whenever we feel awe, and whenever

there's a sudden shock. For example, you're walking across the street, and someone yells an obscenity at you. Before the chain reaction starts, before the aggression or the habitual pattern clicks in, there's a shock, an open space. There's just the fact that something has stunned you, someone has just insulted you, the ground has just fallen out from under your feet. Before trying to get back on solid ground by following the habitual chain reaction, you can pause and breathe deeply in and breathe deeply out. Never underestimate the power of this simple pause.

I do this as a practice whenever the rug gets pulled out, whenever the ground shifts, whether it's something hurting my feelings, or if suddenly, out of nowhere, something shocking happens that brings up panic. Whenever

there's that sting of pain, I practice pausing, because I know that that moment is precious. This is the instruction that I've been given, and it's the one I've offered in this book. If we pause and breathe in and out, then we can have the experience of timeless presence, of the inexpressible wisdom and goodness of our own minds. We can look out at the world with fresh eyes and hear things with fresh ears. In that pause—which is free of bias, free of thinking, just given to us on a silver platter by this person who insulted us—we can relax and open. The sting of that ordinary shock can lead us to a new way of living.

All of our aggressive speech, our aggressive actions, starts in the mind. It starts when we get triggered, when we get hooked. This is the moment of truth for those people who wish to stop wa-

tering the seeds of anger and prejudice. When our lives become uncomfortable, rather than automatically watering these seeds of aggression, we can burn them up.

I often wondered why it is that when I get hooked—when I’m resentful, for example—and I breathe with my discomfort instead of acting out, it feels like I’m sitting in the middle of the fire. I asked Kongtrul Rinpoche about this. He said, “Because by not doing the habitual thing, you’re burning up the seeds of aggression.” As each individual works with it in this way, it’s not just a minor thing. It’s an opportunity we’re given not only to connect with the inexpressible goodness of our minds and our hearts, but also to dissolve aggression in the world.

Someone once asked me, “What would it feel like to have burned up all

those seeds, to be a person who no longer has any aggression?" The person who asked this was thinking that such a person might be pretty boring. No juice, no passion. I answered that I really wouldn't know from personal experience, but I imagine that such a person would be great company. If you dissolved your aggression, it would mean that other people wouldn't have to walk on eggshells around you, worried that something they might say would offend you. You'd be an accessible, genuine person. The awakened people that I've known are all very playful, curious, and unthreatened by things. They go into situations with their eyes and their hearts wide open. They have a real appetite for life instead of an appetite for aggression. They are, it seems, not afraid to be insecure.

In order to change our habits and burn up the seeds of aggression, we have to develop an appetite for what I like to call positive groundlessness, or positive insecurity. Normally, of course, we want to get away from that uncomfortable feeling. It just seems reasonable to want to do so. And it would be reasonable, except for the fact that you may have noticed that it doesn't really work. We've been trying the same ways of getting comfortable for as long as we can remember, and yet our aggression, our anxiety, our resentfulness don't seem to be getting any less. I'm saying that we need to develop an appetite for groundlessness; we need to get curious about it and be willing to pause and hang out for a while in that space of insecurity.

One of the methods I've touched on

for doing this is when you notice that you're hooked, don't act out, don't repress, but let the experience pierce you to the heart. Another suggestion I've made is that when you notice that you're hooked, just pause and breathe deeply in and out, knowing that this is a moment in time that's impermanent, shifting, and changing. This insecurity that you're feeling is nothing monolithic. It's nothing solid. It's not graspable. It's passing. And you can breathe with it and relax with it, and let it pass through you.

Recently I was with Kongtrul Rinpoche and I asked him, "Rinpoche, you've been living in the West now for some time, and you know Western people well. What do you think is the most important advice that you could give to us?" He replied, "I think the

most important thing that Westerners need to understand is guiltlessness.” He went on to explain, “Even though we may make a lot of mistakes and we may mess up in all kinds of ways, all of that is impermanent, shifting, changing, and temporary. But fundamentally, our minds and hearts are not guilty. They are innocent.”

So if at any moment of feeling guilty, insecure, and troubled you were to pause and let go of the words and start breathing slowly and deeply, you could let the whole drama unwind and unravel. If you could hang out in that uncomfortable yet impermanent, ineffable space, you might realize that all of this blaming of other people comes out of simply not being able to stay present.

If you want there to be peace—

anything from peace of mind to peace on Earth—here is the condensed instruction: stay with the initial tightening and don't spin off. Keep it simple.

And there's another essential ingredient: compassion. Train in keeping it simple in the vast context of all sentient beings. Point your finger randomly to any spot on the globe and you know for sure that there are beings there biting the hook. Almost everyone on the planet is addicted to spinning off, and the results aren't looking so good. If even a few of us practice keeping it simple—not making such a big deal out of pleasant and unpleasant—it will make a significant difference.

So the next time you feel yourself getting hooked, see if you can catch it. Can you feel yourself tightening? Can you feel yourself starting to erect

protective barriers? Then pause and breathe with that unsettling energy. Somehow right there, in these moments that we're given over and over, we can realize that the insecurity that we're feeling has the potential of creating a new culture, one based on love and compassion rather than on fear and aggression. We can be part of creating a new culture for ourselves individually and for the world.

When you open yourself to the continually changing, impermanent, dynamic nature of your own being and of reality, you increase your capacity to love and care about other people and your capacity to not be afraid. You're able to keep your eyes open, your heart open, and your mind open. And you notice when you get caught up in prejudice, bias, and aggression. You develop

an enthusiasm for no longer watering those negative seeds, from now until the day you die. And you begin to think of your life as offering endless opportunities to start to do things differently, endless opportunities to dissolve the seeds of war where they originate—in the hearts and minds of individuals like you and me.